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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/OUTREACH: CHARGE MEETING WITH
AMSTERDAM MAYOR COHEN

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. Please handle accordingly.

REF: THEHAGUE 00149

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Charge met with Amsterdam Mayor Job Cohen February 3 to discuss opportunities for Muslim outreach in the city. Cohen complained that the media had distorted his recent comments on "unrest" in Amsterdam, but acknowledged religious/ethnic tensions remain a serious problem. He credited active programs to promote interaction between local authorities and Muslim community leaders with making it easier to anticipate and head off potential problems - "unlike in Paris." Cohen praised recent outreach efforts to the Muslim Community by AMCONSUL Amsterdam and Embassy The Hague and agreed we should continue to work together to promote dialogue. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) On February 3, Charge, POLCOUNS, and Integration Issues Coordinator met with Amsterdam Mayor Job Cohen and Deputy Office Director Geert Jan ter Linden in Cohen's Amsterdam office. A former State Secretary for Justice and one of the most popular members of the Labor Party (PvdA), Cohen presides over a city of 745,000 that includes 218,000 first-generation and 147,000 second-generation immigrants. The largest ethnic group is Surinamese (71,000) followed by Muslim groups including 65,000 Moroccans, 38,000 Turks and 25,000 from Egypt, Iraq, Iran and Somalia. Still, Cohen walks a political tightrope. Rightist critics have charged him with being too "soft" on Muslims because of his focus on dialogue and support for publicly funded integration and education initiatives. On the other hand, Islamic extremists have placed him on their death lists. He has received around-the-clock protection since the murder of Theo van Gogh in November 2004.

RECENT "UNREST" EXAGGERATED

3. (SBU) Cohen said that, with hindsight, his recent remarks to the press about "unrest" in Amsterdam (reftel) had been a mistake. The media had blown his comments out of proportion to create a false impression of large-scale unrest. Given all the attention given to Muslim issues in the press, he added, one would think that he spent his entire day working on nothing else -- in fact, it is just one of many issues occupying his time. On the other hand, Cohen remains concerned that simmering religious and ethnic tensions in the city could lead to more serious problems in the future. While Amsterdam is "not Paris," he said, polarization, poverty, and limited opportunities for young Muslims have created real tensions -- it would not take much to trigger violence.

SOME MEAN STREETS. . .

14. (SBU) In response to a question from Charge, Cohen reviewed the situation in two largely Muslim neighborhoods -- "Diamant" and "Slotervaart" -- which have featured in a number of recent press stories. Incidents in these two areas, led Cohen to make his "unrest" statement during his January 17 press conference.

15. (SBU) Cohen described Diamant as a typical neighborhood that has unfortunately attracted more than its share of media attention. Last New Year's eve, for example, the press reported several attacks on Jews and homosexuals in the area, as well as the vandalism of almost 40 cars. Cohen stressed that Diamant was not the only neighborhood in Amsterdam to experience vandalism on New Year's eve, but acknowledged that the influx of primarily Moroccan immigrants into the neighborhood has created tension between the newer and older residents. Even before the Van Gogh murder, he said, police had responded to several complaints of Muslim youth harassment of Jewish and homosexual residents. Clumsy police efforts to deal with the issue -- including releasing the names of the victims -- had attracted negative media attention. As a result, he said, many in the media automatically look to Diamant whenever they need to run a story on ethnic and religious tensions in the city.

16. (SBU) Cohen said Slotervaart was also a typical Amsterdam neighborhood facing major demographic change. On January 10, the scooter-accident death of a 17 year-old Muslim youth led to a near-riot when observers wrongly assumed the death had resulted from a police chase. Although some residents threw bricks at a local police station following the incident, Cohen stressed that local authorities were able to restore order quickly by working with Muslim community

THE HAGUE 00000308 002 OF 002

leaders to avoid escalating the conflict.

. . . BUT NO PARIS

17. (SBU) According to Cohen, Paris-style violence is unlikely to develop in Amsterdam for several reasons. First, Amsterdam is administratively organized differently from Paris, and better equipped to deal with unrest. The political division of the city into fourteen districts, he said, allows for better control and better information flow in cases of trouble. Second, Cohen stressed that community policing has been a major focus of his administration. Every police district has one or more individuals dedicated specifically to maintaining contacts with community leaders -- such as the "Neighborhood Fathers" organizations in some Muslim neighborhoods -- and promoting youth activities. Although such measures obviously have not eliminated all ethnic and religious tensions, in Cohen's view they have made it easier to anticipate and head off potential problems earlier than in other large urban areas.

OUTREACH

19. (SBU) Cohen praised Consul General Michele Bond's efforts to focus the local Consular Corps on reducing ethnic tensions in Amsterdam. Several Muslim consulates, including those of Morocco and Turkey, are participating in the effort. Cohen also expressed satisfaction with the Embassy's recent selection of Amsterdam Alderman Ahmed Aboutaleb for an International Visitor's Program this year. Cohen did not have specific proposals for further Embassy/Consulate outreach, but agreed to continue what is a very productive and cooperative relationship.

BLAKEMAN